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ABSTRACT

A qualitative study examined the impact of training provided by the Education Studies Department in Dublin City University on adult educators in the sector. It investigated whether courses had an effect on their professional lives as educators within their individual centers and on their own lives as adult students in a formal university setting. The graduating class of 200 (70% female and 60% age 40 or older) was asked to indicate reasons for pursuing a diploma in Further Education and Training. The reasons were further explored through interviews with students. In the area of personal development, improved self-esteem and greater confidence tended to validate experiential learning and, while promotion did not feature as a priority, course involvement greatly enhanced employability. In the area of continuing professional development, the progression rates of students were taken as an indicator of the success of the courses in providing adults with a secure environment in which to study. A survey of course completers at Certificate and/or Diploma level since 1997 indicated a substantial progression rate to further studies. Change at the ideological and activist level was evident from all respondents in relation to the work conducted at their centers and to a lesser extent in the broader community. Students used course work to improve working conditions and the quality of training they provided to trainees. (Contains 11 references.) (YLB)

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Going Further: Adult Educators Reflect on the Impact of Further Education on Themselves and Their Communities

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Going Further

Adult Educators reflect on the impact of further education on themselves and their communities.

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Adult Education is the last area of mass education to be developed in Ireland. The rationale for investment in Adult Education does not rest on purely economic issues, but also on the central role of learning in creating a democratic society, in promoting culture and identity, and in enriching and strengthening individuals, families and communities.

Learning for Life

Introduction

The publication of the White Paper on Adult Education at the outset of the millenium marked a major epoch for those involved in the field of Adult Education in Ireland. For many years seen as the Cinderella of the Irish education system and heavily reliant on voluntary and community support, this new initiative has put forward proposals which should ensure greater investment and support for the sector. There can be no doubt economic issues and the need to project a well-developed education and training system and an adaptable workforce willing to upskill and embrace change strongly influenced the support for lifelong learning. This is indeed acknowledged in the foreword. The Government Minister with responsibility for adult education, Mr. Willie O'Dea, identifies globalisation, increased competition and the impact of new technologies as catalysts for a systematic investment in the sector. (Learning for Life, p9) He goes on, however, to highlight the role of the sector in addressing inter-generational poverty and disadvantage, strengthening individuals, families and communities and promoting democracy and social cohesion. It is this aspect of adult education, which we wish to address in our paper.

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Rationale for Research

The White Paper defines adult education as "*systematic learning undertaken by adults who return to learning having concluded initial education or training.*" (P.12) For the purposes of our research we have taken on board this definition though we are aware that some of those involved in the research are working with groups of adults who may or may not have concluded any form of initial education. The research is set against the backdrop of previous research conducted by our department, into the training needs of trainers within the Further Education sector in Ireland. (McNamara, Mulcahy and O'Hara, 2001) The conclusions of this research from both a quantitative and qualitative perspective identified key training needs. There was a strong emphasis placed on person-centred learning including guidance and counselling, group and interpersonal skills, facilitation and communication skills and, of central importance, understanding of and empathy with the needs and concerns of adult learners. (p. 33) Most of the trainers interviewed work with adults who are experiencing disadvantage in their lives. As outlined by one trainer:

> Staff requires training in encouraging people. They need to see beyond the disadvantage. If you can bring adults along, if they respect and care for you, then this is half the battle. People fall out of education because of personal issues. If staff can work on these issues then students won't be resistant to education.

Training of Trainers P.27

In light of these research findings, it was appropriate to examine the impact of the training provided by the Education Studies Department in Dublin City University for adult educators in the sector. The research set out to look at whether our courses had an effect on their professional lives as educators within their individual centres and on their own lives as adult students in a formal university setting.

In setting out a role for adult education in society, the White Paper (p.28) identifies six priority areas: -

- Consciousness Raising
- Citizenship
- Cohesion
- Competitiveness
- Cultural Development
- Community Building

While the research did not specifically highlight these issues they did clearly inform the research methodology from the perspective of the interview schedule and observation of course participant work.

Many of the initiatives which form the backdrop of the Further Education sector grew out of the work of community based activists who responded very often in an ad hoc fashion to the needs of their local communities. Most of the initiatives were and continue to be based in areas of high unemployment and social deprivation. Our students work in rural and urban centres, some travelling a round trip of 160 miles, twice weekly to attend our courses.

During the lifetime of our Certificate and Diploma courses we have built up a profile of our students based on their initial application forms, questionnaires, course work, observation and post course research.

The initial records indicate that a majority of our students while well skilled in a particular field, do not have any previous formal education. Many are perceived as leaders and activists in their own communities including at least one member of local government, but they have faced many obstacles in the return to formal education. The initial step inside the gates of university has for many, been intimidating and threatening. Two of our female graduates are members of the Travelling community, who deliver training to their fellow Traveller women.

Our research tracks the progress of a group of these students and attempts to ascertain the impact of their time in university on a range of issues. These include:

- Personal development
- Continuing Professional development
- Impact on their organisations
- Changes in employment
- Engagement in civil society.

Research Methodology

The research methodology employed here was mainly qualitative in nature. It is a search for a local truth, through a focus on, what Habermas refers to as the *lifeworld* of the participants. This focus is developed through multiple perspectives, which are compared and contrasted through discourse and dialogical engagement. The use of narrative analysis as espoused by Mishler (1986) and Labov (1982) informed the analysis and interpretation of the data. The research is a faithful representation of the views expressed by our students and because of our close engagement with them we hope that we have been able to elucidate meaning "as virtual participants in the process of reaching understanding among those immediately involved". (Pusey, 1987,p.61)

Background

The School of Education Studies forms part of Dublin City University and is primarily involved in the delivery of courses in the field of Continuing Professional Development. In 1996 the School, in collaboration with the Department of Education and Science set up a Certificate in Further Education and Training. This was followed a year later by a Diploma in Further Education and Training. The primary target for our courses are educators and trainers in the FE field who to date have not received any formal teacher training. The emergence of this field of Further Education and its fairly recent acknowledgement by the Department of Education and Science has heralded a major paradigm shift in Irish education from a singularly academic approach to a recognition of a diverse education and training sector. This new field of Further Education includes the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) for the long term unemployed, Youthreach, which caters for early school leavers, prisoner education, Traveller Training Centres to cater for our ethnic traveller community, centres catering for people with disabilities, area based partnerships and community initiatives.

This initiative recognised that many of those involved in delivering Adult Education courses were recruited on the basis of a trade or business qualification or may have progressed through the ranks of the community and voluntary sector. Many of those presenting for the Certificate did not possess formal qualifications but were accepted on the basis of prior learning, workplace based learning and expertise and experience learned in the field.

The Department of Education and Science covers fees and subsistence on the courses for those applicants who work in centres funded by them. There is also provision for funding for applicants who work in the disability sector. Each year the courses also attract trainers from other government agencies, the private sector, community-based groups and a range of non-government agencies. This mix of students creates a very interesting dynamic within the group and allows for the transfer of skills and the cross fertilisation of ideas. As the research indicates, it may also involve a change in mindset and a clearer understanding of how public, private and community based initiatives may work more closely together.

Students must achieve a specified grade before being allowed to progress from Certificate to Diploma level. The Department of Education and Science does not give formal recognition to the courses for appointment purposes but does offer allowances for the qualifications if a trainer does become a permanent member of staff.

Initial Findings

The Diploma class of 2000 is used here to illustrate a fairly typical student profile.

The class was predominantly female (70%) and 60% were in the 40+ age bracket.

As this was a diploma class, all of the students had completed some form of tertiary training. Completion rate for the Diploma was almost 90%. Students came from various backgrounds including Youthreach, Traveller Training, childcare, the disability sector, literacy groups, Trade Unions, prison education and private industry. A new aspect of the course was the involvement of students who work with refugees and asylum seekers.

This reflects the increase in immigration in Ireland in recent years. In recognition of this fact, the White Paper places inter-culturalism as one of the three core principles underpinning Adult Education in Ireland.

The profile of the group is fairly typical of the picture painted by the OECD in 2000.

(Education at a Glance) There are a high percentage of adults, in the 45-54-age group, who have not completed upper secondary education. Traditionally, this group has been underrepresented at university level. The De Buitlear Report (HEA 1999, p.79) shows that mature students in the Republic of Ireland are predominantly middle class and likely to have completed at least upper secondary education. Our picture is more representative of a group, which lost out on education first time round and have returned to it through local or community involvement. There are an estimated 100,000 women currently involved in community education in Ireland (Aontas, 2001). This may account for the predominance of women on our courses. Also, female participation rates in educational programmes is 61% in contrast to much lower rates of participation in training and employment schemes (39%).

Students were asked to indicate their reasons for pursuing a Diploma in Further education and Training.

In order of importance, these were the top ten reasons: -

- To increase self-esteem
- Personal development
- Professional development
- To develop skills as a trainer
- To better job prospects
- To improve the lives of those with whom I work
- To undertake further study
- To change career
- To enhance IT skills
- To enhance counselling skills.

These areas were further explored through interviews with students from the class of 2000 and previous years and their views are reproduced in the remainder of this paper. There is one other significant point that was noted in profiling both this class and that of previous years. A significant number of students are parents of children who are suffering from learning disability, a specific learning difficulty or some form of chronic illness. This was a sensitive area to pursue with students but some gave this as a reason for their involvement in further education. A range of their comments is reproduced below.

- *From a personal perspective, within the area of disability, I have and will continue to advocate positive change in this area particularly with regard to education and training.*
- *All my life I have been advocating for the disabled. Now I feel I can do it with greater authority and respect.*
- *I gave over a huge block of time to be there for my child. I was an advocate in terms of her school, her place in life, daft things when I look back now. You were always justifying her. You hear all the data about disability and the rights of the disabled and it is a hard, uphill climb.*
- *We have to take on leadership roles in our fight. Maybe that is why we become leaders in our communities and grasp the opportunity to return to education and find out more.*

Personal Development

Research conducted in University College, Cork in 1996 with reference to adult education and empowerment, examines the dimensions of personal change from four perspectives, namely, instrumental, expressive, ideological and activist. (O'Fathaigh and O'Sullivan, p. 185) The growth in personal development and continuing professional development looked at the instrumental and expressive nature of this change as it applied to our students.

It might be assumed that people undertaking a course in education and training are interested primarily in gaining a qualification and getting permanent jobs. The research indicates that this is secondary to the growth in self -esteem and personal development. These results are even more relevant in light of our previous research, which indicates that only 17. 65 % of Further Education co-ordinators surveyed hold a permanent position and up to 85% of trainers fall into the part-time category. (McNamara, et al, p12-14)

One student spoke of the impact on her personal development in terms of her growth in self-esteem in dealing with figures of authority.

> *The impact of the courses on my personal development has been tremendous. My confidence has increased enormously when dealing with the C.E.O. and members of the D.O.E. I am more than able to refute their arguments and feel much more comfortable in articulating my own views. I also think that the qualification in FE gives credence to what you say. People in authority take you more seriously and you have a lot more clout.*

A student from a community based centre, which has recently experienced many difficulties from a management perspective, expresses a similar viewpoint.

After a gap of eighteen years and now pursuing a Masters within the department, these were some of his reflections.

> *A return to study has given me confidence for a start. It was very much about confidence building for me. It also made me focus on different parts of my work. I hate the rigour and the discipline and yet I love the rigour and the discipline. It has given me great confidence in my own ability and not to be intimidated by situations that would previously intimidated me. In a place like this you get consultants coming in and it is good to be confident enough to challenge their view of the organisation.*
>
> *Attending DCU has given me a position within the organisation, not a recognised one maybe, but I now know what I am talking about. You feel much more confident and much more pro-active in suggesting management change. You can identify the reasons for it and the context of it. Beforehand I just wouldn't have known these things.*

Many of our students work in the area of personal development. An evaluation conducted by one of our students into courses delivered to pre release prisons, elicited an interesting comment from one of the prisoners in the area of personal development and self esteem. In conversation with the researcher about the course content of pre release courses, he referred to courses in personal development as *"the only thing the system can do to help people develop themselves."* He went on to state that " *I can't understand how people giving pre release courses, how they haven't got the qualifications in personal development. I know they're experimenting, right."* Such a comment clearly identifies the need to ensure that the self-esteem of our students is developed during our courses if they are going to provide help to their own students. This point is picked up in a comment from a diploma graduate working in the area of Personal Development within the Youthreach sector.

> *Working in the area of personal development, return to work and complementary medicine, I have felt a lack of academic/theoretical background in what I was doing. This had a negative impact on my self-esteem and my assessment of myself as a course provider. I now have greater confidence in my professional work.*

What was clear from the interviews was improved self-esteem and greater confidence tended to validate experiential learning and while promotion did not feature as a priority, course involvement had greatly enhanced employability. Students had in some instances been head hunted by other organisations in their local community, others had become permanent and several were promoted within their organisations.

For one centre co-ordinator, who lacked a professional qualification and was hoping to use the course to further his career, at the conclusion of the course he stated:

> *If there were no possibility of further promotion, I would say the course has been worth it to*

me. I always felt that I could do the work and was professional but yet I feel this qualification has further enhanced my self-esteem. I want to go further, on to degree level. I am grateful to have been given the opportunity to do this course. Because of the lack of academic qualifications, I needed to prove to myself that I could do it.

The research highlighted a further unexpected outcome. The format of our courses from an androgogical perspective places much emphasis on small group interaction, discussion and presentation. This feature of the course was chosen to illustrate an increase in self- esteem and personal development by one graduate from the disability sector. A. has already got a degree and falls into the 20-30-age category. For him the key benefit of the course resulted from this delivery format.

I am a quiet enough person in general when in a group setting. I do not lack confidence but often find myself stopping from saying something because I've not been assertive. The course has helped me become more assertive as well as adding to my self-confidence. I also learned to hone my interpersonal skills through group assignments. Finally, I never addressed a large group like I did in the group presentations. While I found it a daunting prospect, I would not be as intimidated again by the thought of it

Continuing Professional Development

The progression rates of students were taken as an indicator of the success of our courses in providing adults with a secure environment in which to study. Currently the school does not offer a follow on degree. However, students who score an average of 70% or more at Diploma level are afforded an opportunity to enroll on a Postgraduate Diploma, which in turn may lead to a Masters in Education and Training Management.

A survey of students who have completed courses at Certificate and/ or Diploma level since 1997 indicates a substantial progression rate to further studies. In total since our courses commenced in 1996, 16 students have transferred to Postgraduate Studies on completion of the Diploma. A good illustration of this progression is the Certificate class of 1998. On completion of the Certificate, only one qualified student chose not to progress to Diploma level. A further nine students opted to continue with their studies on completion of the Diploma. This represents a progression rate of 40%. While the majority opted to stay within the faculty, at least one student progressed to further studies outside Ireland. Our research also indicates that other graduates from the Diploma, while not progressing to a formal course a university level, do take up short- term courses in areas that have captured their interest. For example, on completion of the Diploma in 1998, while only three students opted to transfer to post graduate studies, a further six students took up short term courses in other institutions. This represented a total figure of 51% who participated in further studies. Currently in Ireland there is no real opportunity to progress to degree level on completion of our courses. One institute does offer a degree through distance education but only one of our students has pursued this option.

While the progression rates to further study from the Certificate and Diploma are encouraging, the research does highlight some very interesting issues.

- Each year our Diploma course continues to attract a far greater number of applications than the Certificate. This seems to indicate reluctance on the part of the adult student to make the first tentative step inside the gates of the university. As one student stated, *" I was terrified of making*

the first move. My memories of school were bad and my self-confidence had taken a battering over the years. Without the level of support that I got I would have run away." Another student referred to *"initial concerns re ability to commit to and complete the course. I'm delighted to have succeeded in finishing it. I needed an anchor in the midst of uncertainty and this was provided for me."* Other students interviewed for this research refer to the importance of a clearly defined structure, a well thought out induction course and the need to provide time for the group to get to know each other. Faced with these levels of insecurity and indecision, it is clear that the resources and personnel need to be put into providing a structured, open and approachable environment, particularly in the initial stages.

- Figures compiled this year in Southern Ireland (McGill and Morgan, p37) indicate that there are 430, 000 what they term '*nearly ready*'adults between the ages of 25 and 64. The term 'nearly ready' indicates those adults who have completed upper secondary education and are nearly ready to progress to university. The '*learning poor*' in the same age bracket numbers 806,000 people or 44.9% of adults who have achieved minimum levels of education. Many of our Certificate students fall into the 'learning poor' category. Their client group within their centres almost certainly fit into this category. By completing the Certificate /Diploma they move up to the 'nearly ready' category. The initial step on to this ladder remains the most difficult to make.
- The research also indicates that students will be more likely to progress to further study if they build up positive relationships with the course provider, the individual lecturing staff and the group. Our results on progression show that in the years where we have been able to offer a Certificate followed by a Diploma the progression rate to further study is stronger than years when only the Diploma is on offer. This year, 2000/2001, only three students (18%) will progress to further study within the faculty of Education Studies. This is in contrast to last year's progression rate of 9 students (43%) where students had progressed from the Certificate to the Diploma. This confidence to progress further on the education ladder is captured by one of the students.

> *In doing the Certificate and Diploma I have a far greater confidence and understanding of my professional work. Furthermore my self- confidence has increased, knowing I'm able to meet the demands of a university course. I've waited a long time for that. Success at Certificate level gave me the impetus I needed.*

What is encouraging however is that 90% of those students surveyed from this years Diploma class expressed an interest in progressing to degree level when this final tier of the programme becomes available in 2002. Further encouragement is drawn from the fact that those students who have enrolled to pursue postgraduate studies within the Department achieve high grades. At least one student has emerged with a First Class honours at Masters level. Reflecting on the impact of further study on her personal and professional life as part of our research, she made the following observations.

> *Learning at university for me was an intensely positive and rewarding experience. I absolutely loved every minute of it. It affirmed me as a person and validated previous knowledge and experience. It in no small way added to my store of knowledge and gave me a recognised national and international qualification. It also whetted my appetite for more and more knowledge.*

Many students echo this thirst for knowledge and learning. They refer to "*the addictive nature of study*".

- *I found myself wanting to find out more and more.*

- *I have to be kept out of bookshops.*
- *I look in every source, books, library, the Internet, you name it.*
- *I was really enjoying college and I wanted to continue. It was something I had wanted to do for a long time. I enjoyed what it was doing to my head.*

Students were also aware that while the initial courses had validated their work in practice, further study would afford an opportunity to expand their horizons even more.

> *I feel that the course has in some way validated my own practice and this has given me the encouragement to continue on. It has given me a greater understanding of good work practice, the need for structure and the importance of evaluation in an educational setting. I want to continue. I hear my little interlocutor ask if I am able for it. To which I reply, 'shut up, I'll try it.'*

Community Change Agents

Change at the ideological and activist level was evident from all our respondents in relation to the work conducted in their centres and to a lesser extent in the broader community. At an activist level some of these changes have already been explored in relation to the advocacy role adopted by those involved in the disability sector. From an ideological perspective two students presented some interesting and unexpected insights.

D. is a trainer with one of the large multinational companies working in the greater Dublin area. He joined the course to gain a formal qualification in the field of training. For him the interaction with a group of people largely working with the marginalised in society had a profound effect.

> *The interaction changed me a lot. It was interesting to hear views from so many different backgrounds. I have always worked in industry and I would never have met people who worked in these disadvantaged areas. It has made a huge impact on me, especially meeting people from the Travelling community. Just to hear people dealing with them and all the work they did was impressive. It was the same with Youthreach. I am now aware of the bad press such groups get. I sit up and take note of the Citizen Traveller campaign, something that would have passed me by in a previous life. I now question something I would not have done in the past. I only knew of the bad things but to hear people speak with such fondness of these groups, has affected me deeply. I respect the work they do and that of the Travelling community in particular. I have become aware of a Youthreach centre round the corner from me and I intend to go down and offer my services. I'm not sure what I can do but I'm willing to offer. I would never have thought of this before. I have changed a lot in the last year. I can see myself getting involved at community level. This is something I would not even have considered in the past.*

P. is a freelance trainer working with the elderly. For many years he has attempted to bring courses for the elderly into the adult education sector and has been a strong advocate in this field. He received government funding to run a conference to highlight the issues of the elderly the year he joined the course. For him the course has acted as a disincentive.

> *For many years I have lobbied for the elderly. I have lobbied politically and at national level. The module on Policy and Practice and the research I did for that paper made me clearly aware of the lack of policy in relation to the elderly. Policy is not policy unless is accompanied by legislation and I learned that no such policy exists. It is like banging your head against a stone wall. In this instance knowledge is not power but quite the opposite. I now wish to use my qualification in a field where there is legislation and my work can be effective.*

Despite such a negative outcome P. was adamant that he would repeat the experience again and seemed happy that it had helped him to make an ideological stance.

For others the ability to analyse and read a situation has had implications for their workplaces through enhanced awareness and understanding.

> *I'm not as emotive. The research allows you to become more analytical. I reflect more particularly in relation to gaps in management. You ask yourself questions and you no longer take things at face value.*

The course work was used by our students to improve working conditions and the quality of training that they provided to their trainees. Several modules such as Advanced Teaching Strategies, Mediation, Learning Difficulties and Evaluation were mentioned as areas where the theoretical input reflected on the practical application and delivery. In conducting curriculum design, evaluations and Action Research students consulted course providers, management and trainees. As a result many of those most marginalised in our education sector were afforded an opportunity to voice their opinions on course content, delivery methodologies and change management. One example would be in the childcare field where parents were asked for their views on the quality of childcare.

> *I was looking at the impact of the course I was delivering on the recipients of the course. Parents were delighted to be involved. They couldn't believe I was interested in what they had to say. The unfortunate thing was I didn't have enough time. But it raised the issue of valuable data and I was able to feed my information back into the main organisation and they can now see the benefits of conducting research in this field. They see the benefit of tracking and now we are at a point where the benefit of a small-scale piece of research for an evaluation will bring about change in the entire organisation at national level.*

The practical nature of such research also appealed to the students.

> *Up until Action Research I did not have a lot of feelings about it. I thought Action Research was great. You picked a topic and applied it in your workplace. And you didn't apply it in a laboratory sort of way, an abstract way. You applied it to a real situation in a real way. It was good and I enjoyed it.*

Others made use of the knowledge of different learning theories and styles to improve their work and in particular the work of Kolb, Gagne and Howard Gardner appeared to open up new horizons for their approach to training.

One key area of community change that must be highlighted is the issue of Traveller Education. In Ireland Travellers are viewed as an ethnic minority. They have a very low completion rate of formal education due to the nomadic nature of their lives, early marriage and the fact that their culture is not

affirmed in any way in the school curriculum. Two members of that community have completed courses at Certificate and Diploma level. They have acted as role models within their community. This has impacted positively on the women in their particular Traveller Training Centre. The achievement is all the more remarkable given that Traveller women are not encouraged to move outside the home, to travel on their own at night or to interact with the settled community. One of these students interviewed for the Irish Times during the Citizen Traveller campaign spoke glowing of her experience and of the support of her fellow students on the course. Further excellent work has been conducted by co-ordinators of these centres, who have completed our courses and involved the Travellers in the centres as key stakeholders in course design and evaluation. Research conducted by one student at post graduate level calls for research into assessment and certification for Travellers to ascertain the cultural appropriateness of systems of assessment designed by settled people for this minority ethnic group. She states, *"Perhaps now in the words of Yeats that the fire has been lit, new and creative ways of fanning the flame will be used to benefit Travellers in our education system."(Connolly, P. 108)*

It is our hope that our graduates will fan the flame in adult education throughout Ireland. The signs from this small-scale research give cause for hope.

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